European journal of American studies
Reviews 2016-3

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Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/11668
ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher
European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference
Sebastian Weier, « John Hanson Mitchell, *Trespassing. An Inquiry into the Private Ownership of Land.* », *European journal of American studies* [Online], Reviews 2016-3, Online since 15 November 2016, connection on 02 May 2019. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/11668

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1 *Trespassing. An Inquiry into the Private Ownership of Land* engages different modes of land ownership by following 350 years of history of a 500-acre tract of land in rural Massachusetts, about 35 miles west of Boston. From its original use by Pawtucket tribes to its contemporary exploitation as apple orchard, John Hanson Mitchell traces the permutations of ownership in this tract through ideas such as *terra nullius, usufruct, the commons, fee simple* and even *zoning codes,* up to its partial acquisition by the local community in order to prevent its commercial development and create an environment protection area. *Trespassing* questions the very possibility of land ownership and the abstractions it implies, arguing instead for a direct engagement with the uniqueness of land as it is experienced, as well as through the relations and communities it creates and maintains. It is its particular methodology, however, which makes this an inspiring book. Combining archival and anthropological approaches with physical movement and literal trespassing to create unconventional modes of knowledge production and narration, it offers a powerful critique of and alternative to classical academic methodologies and the logics of property often inherent to their modern-colonial genealogy and heritage.

2 Located close to the author's house, the tract of land in question–as all land in the United States–was not privately owned until the arrival of the first European settlers. Writes Mitchell:

> 3 No one 'owned' the land; [the Native Americans] simply had, at certain seasons, rights of use,

> generally agreed upon by consensus. At the time of the arrival of the English, in the early 1650s, the area was common land: native people lived there and farmed and hunted and gathered plants, and it may even have been considered sacred. By 1654 it had become crown land, controlled by British Law, and it remained so until the American Revolution. In 1791, it was privatized by American Law, and then in 1980 it came full circle and was purchased by a town land trust and was restored to common land, open to all, as it had been in prehistoric times." (XII)

4 The focus of Mitchell's engagement with this tract rests on its present state, its history as a village for converted Native Americans known as Nashobah Plantation (established in 1654), the deportation of the villagers to an internment camp on Deer Island in Boston Harbor during King Philip's War (1675/76), the selling of this land by the last surviving native inhabitant Sarah Doublet in 1725, and the fight to re-communalize the land at the end of the 20th century.

5 Best known for the close exploration of a single square mile of land called *Scratch Flat* (about which he wrote six books), John Hanson Mitchell pursued a career in journalism after his studies in Paris, Madrid and at Columbia University, becoming among other things the founding editor of the journal of the Massachusetts Audubon Society, *Sanctuary*. This trajectory visibly marks the key contribution of the book: its methodology, which–in accordance with its title–one may term 'trespassing'. Mitchell repeatedly questions the validity of private ownership as a possible relation to land, as opposed to common ownership (as in the idea of the English commons) or non-ownership based ideas of rights of use, either through direct exploitation of resources (e.g. hunting, agriculture) or cultural uses (e.g. sacred land). Trespassing as method incorporates this view on the political economy of land. On the one hand, it refers to literal illegal trespassing on private land, viz. active questioning of the legitimacy of land ownership and refusal to suspend one's own relationship to land out of deference to some higher legal, political and economic order. Here, trespassing becomes a physical way of exploring and questioning private ownership of land. This is a method that creates knowledge as event or practice rather than theory or discourse, as exemplified in Mitchell's intimidating run-ins with the orchard's legal owner, in which land ownership and the rights and implications it bears condense into inter-personal encounters and micro-aggressions rather than mythical force of law.

6 On the other hand, to use trespassing as method means to not simply pursue an exegesis of archival material but to use physical interaction with the subject of inquiry to create descriptions of land,

experiences of land and memories and histories on and related to land as knowledge about this land. As Mitchell writes: “To know a place, to know the real map of the world, you have to get out onto the land and walk” (59). Trespassing does not oppose but complement “scientific” metrical surveys, land deeds or myths and family histories connected to the land with other dimensions such as encounters on the land, the smell of flowers, the observation of birds living there or the cool of the earth and the frozen pond in winter. By thinking land through trespassing, land ceases to be simply an abstract property entity. It is brought back into existential uniqueness and direct experiences of a rich environment that is part not simply of the market, but of the life cycles of nature, the continuing memory of humanity or simply the evanescent periods of childhood or retirement of members of the community living on or near the Nashobah land. As such, one could cautiously link trespassing as methodology to a larger corpus of decolonial thinking and methodologies that has been evolving rapidly since the 1990s, when this book was first published. However, Mitchell’s engagement with the Native American history of the land is at times deficient.

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Mitchell offers an implicit critique of and alternative to the neo-liberal logics inherent to many contemporary academic practices. Refusing to look at land through the capitalist and even colonial eyes of a land surveyor, property lawyer or housing developer, he often takes inspiration from information he gathers about the Native American people who had been living on this land long before the advent of private property. He imagines scenes of Sarah Doublet and others interacting with the land and the changing historical events and circumstances that impact it. But although Mitchell seeks to give word to Native Americans themselves when committing to this “conjecture” (22), exploring the tract of land among others with a man calling himself Nanachuse (205.ff.), these direct interactions with representatives of the people whose culture and history so inspire his writing remain marginal and his conjectures concerning them often seem stereotypical and flat. Admittedly, Mitchell’s goal is not to propose an appropriating form of salvage anthropology, or to pose Native American ways of relating to land as a romantic past Utopia to return to. Rather, he is interested in exploring the history and genealogy of his very own community’s relation to the land. This enquiry into his own community does interrogate the legitimacy of the expropriation of its original inhabitants as well as contemporary land restorations and the rights that come with them (such as the permission to run a casino). But it does not develop into a broader structural critique of land ownership in a settler-colonial civil society and legal system. Rather, it remains on a level of immediacy and direct relations that finds expression through Mitchell marking information as acquired either through recurring conversations with people of that community, such as the old farmer Mr. Couper or the legal explanations of a friend he generally refers to as “The Solicitor.” Though including historical and archival material in *Trespassing*– “the usual sources–old maps, surveys ad

legal documents" (XII)–Mitchell does not list any written sources, neither in-text nor in form of a bibliography. Instead, next to the conjectures, *Trespassing* offers plenty of anecdotes on not only the tract of land in question, but also the life of his informants and other people inhabiting the Nashobah land.

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Trespassing is a lyrical and elegantly written *Inquiry into the Private Ownership of Land*. While Mitchell's direct engagement with the contemporary politics of settler-colonialism remains insufficient, the book's strength lies in its venturing of the beaten path of academic analysis to focus on moments of immediacy. John Hanson Mitchell dedicates himself to revealing those dimensions of land and ownership therein that he considers lost or willfully ignored in private property dealings. At the same time, he does not simply delve into romantic descriptions of endangered species and nostalgic sunsets (thought there is some of this in the book). Nor does he offer a vision of trespassing and interrogation of ownership akin to squatting houses or the punk anarchism this is often associated with. *Trespassing* as method is a form of civil disobedience opposing natural laws of life and movement to property statutes of positive law. Mitchell's *Trespassing* is not intended as banal youthful spite in the face of authority, but as a call to rediscover and relate to land beyond pure administrative affect. As such, there is a markedly white middle-class conservational aspect to it. *Trespassing* is an attempt to understand and narrate communities and their transformations through human relations to land. It is a well-meant but slightly myopic call to not let property destroy communities in a country whose national territory and history are made of such destruction.

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